

TAJI

The Lost Heir



Naomi Maina



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Taji: The Lost Heir

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Cover design by Wikitabu Publishers

Edited by Musa Asubuhi

Printed in Kenya

Ebook ISBN: 978-9914-27-894-1

ISBN: 978-9914-27-502-5

For more information, visit: Wikitabu Publishers

Email: info@wikitabu.co.ke

To my daughter, my greatest inspiration and a constant reminder of the beauty, courage, and wonder within every child; this story is for you.

And to all young readers, you are powerful, you are great, and may your star shine brightly, always.

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Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude goes to my editor, (Musa Asubuhi) Wikipabu Publishers Ltd, whose patience, insight, and dedication helped shape *Taji: The lost heir* into the story it was always meant to be. Your attention to detail and belief in this work truly made a difference.

I am also deeply thankful to my family and friends. Thank you for your constant love, encouragement, your belief in me, and unwavering support. It kept me going.

Welcome to Your Leadership Journey!

In this reading adventure, you will discover that true leadership begins with your character, not a fancy crown.

As you read the story of Taji, you will look for Six Invisible Jewels that every great leader wears:

1. Wisdom (Making smart choices)
2. Courage (Being brave)
3. Patience (Waiting calmly)
4. Justice (Being fair to everyone)
5. Generosity (Sharing and giving)
6. Listening (Paying attention to others)

Take your time to read each chapter, you can go at your own pace!

What You Need to Gather

- Your copy of the book Taji: The Lost Heir
- A notebook or journal (This will be your Leadership Diary)

CHAPTER 2: THE CHANDE FESTIVAL

Jewels to find: Courage & Wisdom

- a. Activity 1 - Clap the Beat: Think of your favourite song or dance.

Clap a cool rhythm with your hands (like clap-clap-pause-clap). If you have a family member they can sing along or help you dance.

- b. Reading Time: Read Chapter 2. Pay close attention to how Taji feels before, during, and after she dances. Answer these in your diary:

i. How did Taji feel when she was called to the center stage? What helped her feel brave?

ii. Have you ever been to a music festival, a party, or a school show? What was it like?

- c. Creative Activity: On a fresh page, draw a picture or write a short paragraph about a time you had to be really brave.

- d. Reflection: Write down one word that describes how it feels to overcome fear and be brave.

CHAPTER 3: BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Jewels to find: Justice, Listening, & Wisdom

- a. Activity 1: Write down “Two Truths About My Family.” These should be two things you absolutely love about your family or your home.

- b. Reading Time: Read Chapter 3. Pause when Lala

Chapter 2

The Chande Festival

They heard the festival before they saw it.

The drums reached them first, a layered, rolling sound that seemed to come from the ground as much as the air. Then the ululations, sharp and joyful. Then the smell: roasted maize, something sweet frying in oil, charcoal smoke.

Then they crested the rise, and the whole field opened before them.

Taji stopped walking.

Hundreds of people were spread across the open plains, seated in tents, standing in circles, moving in processions. The colour alone was enough to stop her: the flowing red and white of the Giriama women, the warm sienna of visitors from the highlands, bright orange and deep indigo; combinations she didn't recognise from anywhere she knew. Children ran between the tents. Elders sat in careful, dignified clusters. At

Taji

the centre, a wide open stage stood ready.

Her feet seemed to gain a life of their own, she wanted to run.

“Hey.” Nina caught her arm gently. “What’s the rush?”

Taji looked at her. She had no words for the rush.

They made their way toward the Giriama tent to their left. Nina steered with a hand at Taji’s shoulder, pausing to greet people, exchanging words with community leaders she knew. The food tent was nearby, viazi karai glistening in oil, achari piled in colourful bowls, plates of kashata, and at the grill, joints of nyama choma browning over charcoal, making promises about later.

“Later,” Nina said, reading her expression. “I promised.”

Taji found some of her friends and greeted them eagerly, then sat on a stool as Nina excused herself to meet with other community representatives. The sun was strong and the ground was dry. The plains had seen no rain for at least six weeks, unusual enough that people kept remarking on it. The elders had been holding night vigils, asking the land to receive water. Loose straw had been laid across the ground to reduce the dust, but it barely helped. Taji reached for her water bottle and drank in four long gulps.

Around her, the preparations were well underway. Her peers formed a loose circle for what she recognised as the Chaka Chaka dance, moving in orbit, their anklets ringing, voices soft. In the next tent, a group dressed in ochre-coloured cloth arranged themselves beneath feathered head-dresses. Further along, half-hidden by a canvas partition, she could hear something low and resonant, not quite drums, more like a vibration beneath drums, felt more than heard.

She was still looking when Nina reappeared at her elbow.
“Come. We’re on.”

* * *

One of the Giriama leaders called their group to the centre stage.

Taji felt her heartbeat change.

She had danced in the compound. She had danced on the path, at small gatherings where everyone present had known her since childhood. This was different. The stage was open on all sides, and the crowd, all those faces, all those different communities, watched from every direction.

Her palms were wet. Her legs uncertain beneath her.

Nina turned to look at the group. Her gaze moved across each woman’s face and rested on Taji last. Taji was trying to look calm. She was not calm. Nina held her gaze for a moment, then quietly began to hum.

The old song. The same one Nina had sung to her as a young child when the dark was too heavy and she couldn’t sleep in a house that wasn’t yet home. Taji recognized it in her body before her mind caught up.

She breathed.

Nina winked, once, and turned back to lead.

She began the solo, a low, swaying opening phrase, and her hips started to move. The others joined. Taji joined. The rhythm settled into her feet, her waist, her shoulders, and everything that had been tight in her chest loosened. Chaka chaka cha... chaka chaka cha. The waist scarf moved with her,

Taji

marking each rotation. She stopped thinking about the faces. She stopped thinking about anything.

When it was over, the applause was real.

* * *

The festival widened after that. More communities took the stage, each one distinct, each one arresting. A group from the north performed with long-handled instruments producing a sound somewhere between a hum and a roar.

A troupe of younger coastal dancers moved in formations so precise they seemed rehearsed over years.

An elder from somewhere in the highlands performed a solo recitation, story or praise-song, it was hard to say, and even those who couldn't follow the language sat still and listened.

Then a new group came to the centre stage.

The leader wore a head regalia of layered sheepskin, shaped into something that sat on his head like a living crown. The women behind him were dressed in brown lessos, their beaded necklaces heavy and thick at their collarbones, large earrings pulling gently at their earlobes. When they began to move, the jingles on their feet produced a sound she hadn't heard before, a layered, ringing shimmer.

They sang as they danced, moving in careful, deliberate circles.

Taji didn't understand the words.

But something rose in her chest.

Not recognition exactly, something beneath recognition, older than language. The melody moved in a particular way,

turned at a particular place in the phrase, and her body registered it before she could think about why. Like hearing a lullaby she had once known but couldn't remember ever having learned. Like finding a path in the dark that her feet already knew.

A strange warmth spread through her. She stood.

Her peers were jumping, moving in cheerful imitation of the dance's more energetic gestures. Taji didn't imitate. She closed her eyes.

She began to move from somewhere beneath thought. Her feet placed themselves. Her hips found the rhythm on its own terms, not as something learned but as something returned to. Her hands lifted. She didn't open her eyes. The jingles, the drums, the circular melody, they moved through her like something that had been waiting to be let out.

She wasn't copying anyone. Her body simply knew.

When she opened her eyes, some of her peers had stopped to watch. A few of the Agikuyu dancers, she would learn that was who they were, had noticed her too. Their eyes moved between her feet, her hands, the gold beads in her braids catching the afternoon light.

At the far edge of the crowd, an old man leaned forward on his walking stick.

His name was Gitonga. He had been an elder of the Agikuyu for longer than most people at this festival had been alive. He studied the dancing girl with the amber skin and the intricate braids. He studied the six knots. He studied the beads forming the shape of a crown. He studied the small scar above her right eyebrow.

His breath slowed. He looked again, not in doubt, but the

Taji

way a man looks when something he has been searching a very long time for suddenly stands twenty metres in front of him.

He straightened. Turned to the younger man beside him. Spoke quietly. Then he began to move through the crowd.

* * *

Above the festival, clouds were gathering, soft at the edges, building slowly. A breeze crossed the plains. Women in the nearest tent reached for their wraps. Taji continued to dance, and the clouds continued to gather.

Nina saw the clouds. She saw Gitonga moving. She saw the eyes on her niece.

She moved through the crowd and reached Taji's side, placing a hand on her arm, gentle but firm. "Come," she said. "Sit with me."

She guided Taji back to their tent and sat her on a stool. She produced a bowl of fruit from her kyondo and placed it in Taji's hands. Her own heart was going too fast. Taji ate a piece of mango and looked out at the festival, unaware.

Nina was still watching the field when she saw Gitonga approach her village elders. He spoke quietly. The Giriama leaders listened, their expressions shifting. One of them looked toward Nina.

She felt the colour leave her face.

The elders from both communities turned and walked toward the tent.

* * *

They moved to a quieter corner of the grounds, Nina, Taji, the Giriama elders, the Agikuyu delegation. The rain that had been threatening started then, softly, a drizzle that sent people reaching for shukas and sheepskin coats. Mothers pulled children close.

Gitonga approached Taji with careful, deliberate steps. His walking stick tapped a slow rhythm on the earth. He studied her face, methodically, the way you check something against a description held in memory. Her face. Her braids. The scar above her right eyebrow.

He turned and spoke quietly to his companion, a younger man who served as his translator.

The young man cleared his throat. Looked at Nina. “He says... he says he knows this child.”

Nina stiffened. “Knows her? How?”

Gitonga spoke again. The translator swallowed before answering. “He says the braiding pattern she wears, those six knots with the crown symbol formed by the gold beads, it’s not a Giriama style. It’s an Agikuyu style.” He paused. “More specifically, it belongs to a single clan. The Athamaki. The royal clan.”

The silence that followed was complete.

“He also says,” the translator continued, his voice lower, “that the child has a scar above her right eyebrow. A scar that matches a birthmark described in a search that has been ongoing for ten years.”

Nina looked at Taji. Taji stood very still, eyes wide, her bowl of fruit held loosely in both hands. She was looking at Gitonga. Gitonga was looking at her.

Taji

The silence stretched between them like something alive.

* * *

Before anyone left the festival grounds, Gitonga called one of his messengers aside. He took a piece of papyrus from his sash and wrote with careful, deliberate strokes. He pressed his left thumb into ink and marked the bottom. He rolled the papyrus tightly, wrapped it in cloth, and handed it to a young man named Njoroge.

“Make haste,” Gitonga said. “Directly to Muthamaki.”

Njoroge and a warrior left on horseback immediately, moving against the direction of the gathering clouds, toward the mountain road.

